

Concepts of Man

by Andreas Peglau¹

Each and every one of us has - at least unconsciously - an image or concept of Man: Assumptions about what people are like in general, good or bad, capable of learning and changing or not, reliable or unreliable, lazy or industrious, under what circumstances they feel comfortable, how they react in a particular situation, what makes them happy, sad or angry, what drives them, what can influence them, etc.

Depending on what we consider to be true in this respect, we also assess what causes and remedies there are for negative social developments - such as the fascistoid ones.

Different views of human beings² inevitably lead to different results. The less a conception of man grasps reality, the less suitable it is as a basis for meaningful action.

This can be illustrated by some central theses of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich.

Man as an asocial being

The aging Freud increasingly saw the human being as a "wild beast" to whom "the protection of one's own kind is alien"; man is, after all, "man's wolf" (Freud 1930, p. 471).

His [belief in the existence of a "death instinct"](#) is shared by many of today's psychoanalysts. Who thinks so, must see people to be dangerous, violent and destructive - from the birth.

The analyst Franz Alexander (1938, p. 69) meant, when a child comes into the world, it is

"not in the least adapted to the demands of social life; it is [...] an asocial being. [...]
This truth was anticipated by [\[Denis\] Diderot](#) in his assertion, that the very small child would be the most destructive criminal, if only it had the power to carry out its aggressions."

But even those who - like the [behavioral scientist Konrad Lorenz](#) - postulate "only" an innate *aggression* instinct come to the conclusion: without external occasions or necessity, our biological defaults urge us to regular aggressive discharge - we are genetically programmed time bombs.³

Such fatalistic views can be used - and are used⁴ - to justify state violence and oppressive education.

Even Sigmund Freud's daughter Anna, devoted to child therapy, claimed, "destructiveness," "cruelty," "shamelessness and curiosity" were "outflows of infantile sexual impulses". From this she deduced: "The educator is obligated to disturb, to make more difficult and in many cases to prevent them" (A. Freud, 1932a, p. 15; 1932b, p. 395).

¹ Abridged and translated excerpt from Andreas Peglau, "[Rechtsruck im 21. Jahrhundert. Wilhelm Reichs Massenpsychologie des Faschismus als Erklärungsansatz](#)" (Shift to the right in the 21st Century. Wilhelm Reich's *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* as an explanatory approach) 2017, pp. 60-67.

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Please note: My English skills are not very good. Therefore, I first translated the text with [DeepL](#) and then corrected it. I expect that there are still translation errors - and ask those who discover such errors to send a message to info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de

² Overviews of this with different focal points can be found in Fahrenberg 2011; Danzer 2011, Petzold 2015.

³ Cf. Fromm 1989d, pp. 13-30.

⁴ The historian Jörg Baberowski also invokes this. To justify his credo, "Only clear, rule-conforming power relations that can be enforced by force if necessary power relations can protect us [...] from unbridled violence", he also quotes Freud several times (Baberowski 2016, back cover; *ibid.*, p. 148).

Moreover, this provides simultaneously a pseudo-explanation for all "evil", for murder, war,⁵ fascism as well as for childish undesirable developments, and it is not necessary to think more deeply about psycho-social causes, fundamental possibilities for change and personal responsibility.⁶

The "solutions" resulting from such views are obvious: drive suppression, control, deterrence. Freud added: „sublimation“, redirection of the energy of the death drive to strengthen the superego - i.e., more intensive self-suppression - as well as strengthening of the life instinct "Eros" as the supposed antagonist of the death drive (Freud 1930, pp. 481-493).

This would mean above all, through therapy to bring about a psychic restructuring in the individual. Since Freud was also aware of the impossibility of applying psychotherapy across the board, this means that he had no feasible proposal for how "evil" could even be controlled. He considered it impossible to get to the root of the problem anyway.

Man as a prosocial being

The absurdity of the death instinct thesis has already been pointed out many times by Wilhelm Reich, beginning in 1932 with his article *Der masochistische Charakter. Eine sexualökonomische Widerlegung des Todestriebes und des Wiederholungszwanges* (The masochistic character. A sexual economic refutation of the death instinct and the repetition compulsion, Reich 1932).

By far the most detailed and conclusive refutation of the death instinct theses hypothesis, based on numerous evidences from psychoanalysis, (social) psychology, paleontology, anthropology, neurophysiology, animal psychology, and historical science, is offered by Erich Fromm's *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, published in 1973 (Fromm 1989).

Modern neurobiology and neuropsychology have also invalidated the notion of an innate "evil" many times over and have instead demonstrated an innate capacity for constructive prosocial behavior.⁷

The proof of this can be obtained by anyone in a simple way: by contact with very young children and consciously perceiving their intense interest in affectionate relatedness and their capacity for *situationally appropriate* aggressiveness.

Wilhelm Reich wrote in 1946, in the third edition of his *Mass psychology of fascism* in this regard of a "biological nucleus" which enables man "to develop an honest, laborious under favorable social circumstances honest, industrious, cooperative, loving, or, if justified, rationally hating animal" and of the innate capacity for "self-regulation".⁸

Already plants have a kind of inner construction and development plan, "know" what is necessary to fulfill it: Light, water, nutrients, etc.⁹ Humans come, in this respect, with an even more sophisticated inner "compass", feel what they need: not least tenderness, contact, communication, appropriate expression of feelings - and other people. Not to destroy and torment them, but to be well cared for, to be encouraged in further growth, to experience positive relatedness, to be able to love and to be loved.

An "asocial", even "death drive" driven infant would not be viable.

⁵ This was shown for example in the journal *Die Psychoanalytische Bewegung* (Psychoanalytic Movement) in 1931. Under the motto "Psychoanalysis and Politics" one learned there about how wars come: "The id (Es) gives the order to the ego (Ich) to build cannons and then lights the fuses without asking the ego" (Peglau 2017a, pp. 146-149).

⁶ Konrad Lorenz' theory of the "aggression instinct" can also be questioned whether he did not also use this to justify his culpable involvement in the Nazi regime (<https://www.gwup.org/infos/themes/107-other-themes/734-the-so-called-aggression-instinct>).

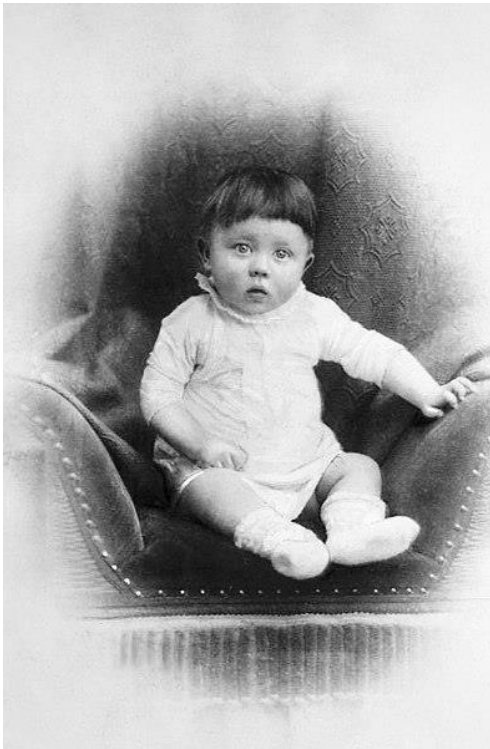
⁷ Hüther 2003; Solms/Turnbull 2004, pp. 138ff, 148; Tomasello 2010; Klein 2011; Bauer 2011. Also Erwin Wagenhofer's 2013 published film documentary *Alphabet - Angst oder Liebe* (Alphabet - Fear or Love) illustrates this (<http://www.alphabet-film.com/>).

⁸ Reich 1986, p. 11.

⁹ Wohlleben 2015.

The destructively made human being

There is an impressive, surreal scene at the end of the [1985 Soviet film „Come and See“](#) by [Elem Klimov](#). The boy whose entire family was murdered by the fascist army, in whose native Belarus hundreds of villages were reduced to rubble, who just escaped a massacre by a hair's breadth, shoots at a portrait photo of the "Führer". With every shot, Hitler gets a little younger. Finally, a little Adolf is sitting on his mother's arm. That's when the boy stops shooting.



Child picture of Adolf Hitler.
[File: Bundesarchiv Bild 183-1989-0322-506](#)

Erich Fromm (1989, pp. 335-393) has described in detail how Adolf Hitler, in the course of his life, only gradually took on those traits which then - in interaction with many other factors - made him become a criminal. With certainty also Hitler did not come into the world as a monster either.

Anyone who is familiar with the life story of the Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels¹⁰ - he was born in 1897, the same year as Wilhelm Reich -, comes across an enthusiast in his youth. Goebbels writes poems, plays and piano pieces, reads among others Gottfried Keller, Theodor Storm, Schiller and Goethe. He falls in love and hopes for a life full of love and recognition.

His early developed clubfoot, or rather the negative reactions to this handicap, plays a part in the fact that this hope visibly fails. For his strict Catholic parents, the clubfoot represents a "visitation" that is best hidden. Among relatives and classmates, it triggers aversion or even disgust, and later also among some women. Gradually, instead of the unfulfilled love for other people, the substitute object "fatherland" comes to the fore. In 1914 he already shares the "national euphoria" at the outbreak of the First World War.

But still in 1919, as a "völkisch", nationalistic 22-year-old, Joseph Goebbels successfully applied to a Jewish professor for a doctorate and described this man to be "an extraordinarily kind" and "obliging".

In 1920, Goebbels reflects on the initially victorious "leftist" mass uprising in the Western region of Germany against reactionary Freikorps and the Reichswehr as follows: "Red revolution in the Ruhr (...) I am enthusiastic from a distance". To his girlfriend he writes: "This capitalism has learned nothing from the new era, and does not want to learn anything, because it puts its own interests before those of the other millions."

In his search for a "genius" who might redeem him and Germany, he hears of Hitler for the first time in 1921 - and is disappointed. He rhymes: "If I only see a swastika, I already get the urge to shit." ("Seh ich nur ein Hakenkreuz, krieg ich schon zum Kacken Reiz")

Professional and private frustrations, unemployment, hunger, existential insecurity, psychic problems pile up. Feelings of futility, suicidal thoughts, alcohol abuse, nervous breakdowns, „phases of deep depression" now alternate with "outbreaks of fanatical will".

¹⁰ See Goebbels 1992; Longerich 2010; Reuth 1991, where you can find the following quotations at pp. 52-73.

In 1922 - "love of the fatherland" had meanwhile become "worship" for him - he learns from his fiancée that she is "half-Jewish". He is irritated, but does not end the relationship at first. In 1924, he can still find positive sides to the „Capital“, written by the Jew Karl Marx.¹¹ Soon, however, such attitudes will have been extinguished. National Socialist ideology and the cult of the „Führer“ allow him to replace feelings of inferiority and depression by an almost permanent fanaticism.

Now, for him, "up in the sky, a white cloud is forming cloud to the swastika."¹²

In April 1926 he writes to Hitler:

"Then a day may come when everything will break. We will not break then.

Then may come an hour when the mob around you bawls and bellows: 'crucify him!'; we then stand ironclad and shout 'Hosiannah!'

Then around you stands the phalanx of the last, who even with death do not despair. The staff of characters, the iron ones, who no longer want to live when Germany dies."¹³

The emerging of the slaving Jew- and Communist-hater and unconditional henchman of Hitler is completed. However, this process had taken almost 30 years.

Still today it is true: Even those politicians who unscrupulously give murder orders, who stimulate mass murder with arms deliveries, even those mercenaries, religious or ideologic fanatics who then commit these murders, even entrepreneurs who are willing to sacrifice peace and ecological livelihoods to their profit interests, even fascists who massacre dissenters or "strangers", came into the world a few decades ago with a healthy potential and the ability to self-regulate, wanted and were able to love.

What is the reason if this potential has not developed?

Because of what many might call "normal upbringing".¹⁴

Children are in no way less worthy than adults, but compared to the latter, they have little opportunity to determine their own circumstances. In a world that is highly shaped by neuroticized adults who have already been made destructive, there is therefore little room for healthy children to flourish.

Authoritarian structured educators always look for someone who is far enough "down" to be "kicked" without danger. Seen in this way, children are always "down".¹⁵

The resulting suffering and deprivation, their often inadequately satisfied needs, cause grief, pain and rage – which, as a rule, must not be adequately expressed to their educators.

These feelings therefore accumulate until they reach destructive proportions: The "middle layer of character" (Reich 1986, p. 11) with its sadistic impulses emerges - and in economic systems based on exploitation, it is later intensified by humiliations in the sphere of work.

Since even such pent-up feelings are usually not allowed to be acted out officially – unless we for example become soldiers –, they are hidden behind a facade of social conformity, politeness and niceness.

¹¹ Longerich 2010, p. 58.

¹² Reuth 1991, p. 104.

¹³ Ibid, back cover.

¹⁴ As to Goebbels, information about his childhood is sparse and, since they come largely from himself, hardly objective. His father was "of Prussian rectitude." His "love" for his wife and children, so Goebbels, was shown in "torturing them with little finesses and and chicaneries". Joseph and his siblings feared his "spartan breeding." He describes the mother as melancholy and decidedly "plain," but he felt that "the love which she owed her husband" was given to her son Joseph. In fact she apparently raised him to authoritarian, ritualized fear of God (Reuth 1991, p. 13f.).

¹⁵ That strict authoritarian upbringing, expressly oriented toward "obedience," is by no means "out" in Germany, is proven for example by the publications of the former head of the Salem School, Bernhard Bueb, and their positive reviews in media such as the Bild-Zeitung (detailed critique of Bueb's concept in Brumlik 2007).

In this way, the upwardly hunching, downwardly stepping authoritarian character described by Reich as early as 1930 is propagated in the next generation. And this kind of psychic disturbance, in contrast to most of what appears in medical diagnostic directories from claustrophobia to depressive episodes, has highly alarming consequences for the entire social fabric.¹⁶ Not least because the destructive emotions can burst out of hiding at any time when the occasion arises - all the more easily when socially weaker people are available as targets.

This concept of Man also sketches the basic mechanism of how, according to Wilhelm Reich, healthy children are neuroticized and turned into psychosocial time bombs.

For the more destructive people become, the more usable they are for destructive purposes, whether these are associated with nationalist, neo-fascist, fundamentalist, imperialist, environmentally destructive, anti-children, anti-women, homophobic or xenophobic ideologies. If the explosive rage is offered an outlet, the attitudes are interchangeable: Terror and murder can be perpetrated with the alibi of a "right-wing" as well as a "left-wing" worldview, for the glory of any God, in favor of an eco-dictatorship or as a component of Western neoliberal or "rule-based" world order.

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¹⁶ Presumably, this type of mental disorder does not appear in diagnostic directories such as the ICD 10 only because it is so "normal" (in the sense of usual). But also because it is needed for the maintenance of the existing power relations and for the preparation of wars. If this disorder becomes evident in people in power, it is usually not spoken of as a neurosis anyway, but as political action.

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